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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [NL](#) [AF](#) [NATO](#)

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ISAF: PM FAILS TO ALLAY CABINET CONCERNS

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Chat Blakeman,  
reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: PM Balkenende was unable win full Cabinet support December 2 for Dutch plans to participate in ISAF Stage III, a setback that surprised many who thought the Dutch leadership had answered most political concerns after meetings this week with Assistant Secretaries Fried and Flory and SACEUR Gen. Jones. The Cabinet will revisit the issue at the next Cabinet meeting on December 9. MFA sources said Foreign Minister Bot hopes to discuss the issue with U/S Burns and A/S Fried at the OSCE Ministerial in Ljubljana December 5 and with the Secretary at the NAC Ministerial December 8-9. Balkenende sought to downplay the setback. He told reporters after Cabinet that "a lot of headway" has been made "but it is a complicated issue and we are not going to take this decision hastily." End summary.

Cabinet Doubts  
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2. (C) National Security Advisor Rob Swartbol and MFA Deputy Director General for Political Affairs Peter de Gooijer reported the same account of the Cabinet meeting: Bot and Defense Minister Kamp presented a joint statement supporting deployment; Balkenende concurred. After lengthy discussion, several of the 16 Cabinet members expressed skepticism -- including Interior Minister Remkes and both D-66 Cabinet members, Minister of Economic Affairs Brinkhorst and Minister for Kingdom Affairs and Government Reform Pectold. Swartbol and de Gooijer suggested some members questioned why Kamp and Balkenende had earlier opposed but now supported the deployment, and needed more time to consider the issue.

3. (C) Swartbol and de Gooijer also said cost-sharing of maintenance and repair at Kandahar airport and security concerns figured prominently in the discussion. But they said the most contentious issue involved the treatment of prisoners captured in Uruzghan, where the Dutch are to deploy. Several members pushed for stronger assurances that prisoners would be turned over to Afghan authorities, and detained in facilities that meet international human rights standards, with full access allowed to the ICRC.

4. (C) Both also noted that the Cabinet will continue discussion of the deployment at its next meeting December 9. MFA Deputy Director of the Conflict Prevention Division Joop Nijssen said the meeting will include a military briefing on the feasibility of the mission, followed by a report from Bot on the results of the NAC Ministerial. He said Bot will push for strong assurances in Brussels on detainees and cost-sharing at Kandahar airport, but now lacks the political mandate to give NATO a positive response in the event these issues are resolved. De Gooijer added that Bot's consultations in Ljubljana and Brussels now take on greater importance.

Balkenende Comments  
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5. (U) Following the Cabinet meeting Balkenende told reporters "in many areas we made headway. However, several issues remain to be resolved." He told national television: "No decision was made this afternoon. It is a complex consideration. And the Cabinet has to be cautious and look at all factors." He added: "This concerns a NATO operation, not an American operation. There are more countries involved." He was asked whether the Netherlands could back away from the deployment -- "No commitment has been made. The Cabinet will make a decision and then Parliament."

To Be Continued  
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6. (C) News of sharp and vocal disagreement within Cabinet comes as something of a surprise. On the eve of the meeting, Dutch officials here and in Brussels repeatedly pointed to assurances made by the November 30 delegation led by A/S Fried and ASD Flory -- and results from the SACEUR Gen. Jones and Dutch CHOD Gen. Berlijn December 1 meeting -- as tipping the scales in favor of deployment. Even media reports made an "about face" in the past few days, reporting that Cabinet now favored the mission. Although final Cabinet approval was never foreseen before December 9, a weakened Bot will now go to the NAC ministerial without a clear political mandate.

The opposition of both D-66 Cabinet members also indicates a difference of opinion within the governing coalition -- not just with the opposition Labor Party (PvdA). However, the decision today was not a "no" -- delayed discussion leaves open the door that Cabinet might still approve the deployment.

BLAKEMAN